

A Widow's Promise

Mark 12: 38-44

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Our passage this morning comes from the book of Mark. Leading up to this point Jesus had been tested again and again by the chief priests, scribes, and Sadducees. After responding to their questions, Jesus went to the temple to teach. This is where our passage picks up.

Mark 12: 38 – 44

Prayer: Open our hearts, O God, and soften our spirits so that we might feel Your Spirit among us.

Bless my words that they may be vessels of Your gracious love, and ready our ears for Your message to us. Amen.

I cringe when someone asks me, “so, what do you do?” I wish I could tell people I’m an astrophysicist or an endocrinologist, something that would scare people away from thinking they know all about what I do. “Really?” they might say, “what does that mean?”

But, I have trouble lying, even if I want to. For a while I could get a way with “I study religion.” But then I started working here, and, in all fairness, I feel obligated to tell people just what I do. So, reluctantly and often very timidly, I say “I’m a pastor.”

The reason I cringe to share this is *not* because I’m embarrassed about what I do. I love what I do. I think it’s important, valuable, and life-giving. The reason I cringe is that inevitably people think they know what it means to be a minister, to be a pastor. And that often prevents us from having a meaningful or productive conversation.

So when I tell people “I’m a pastor,” some think that means I yell condemnations from the pulpit, and so they look at me with a sneer and dismiss me as an extremist. Some think that I secretly want to convert them or remind them of all their sins—so they talk slowly and carefully and look at me suspiciously. Others think that as soon as you meet a minister you must go straight into confession: “Oh, please forgive me, I cussed out my boss again.” Others think they need to defend just how

religious they are: “Oh you're a minister? I go to church 8 times a week and I've read the bible upside down.” Still others immediately defend not going to church at all: “I'm spiritual, not religious.”

As soon as I tell people what I do, conversation tends to stop entirely, or turn into nothing but one-sided talk about religion. In these moments, I'd rather be an astrophysicist. Maybe then people would wonder more about the person I am and the work I do, instead of assuming they already know it all. I learned early on that being a minister means coming face to face with how people view religion and religious people. And, most of the time, these views are pretty frustrating.

I don't think that religion is *necessarily* violent or monstrous, but I don't think that it's necessarily good either. I don't think that all religious leaders want is money, but I do think money is important for the work of any institution. I don't think that religion means checking your mind at the door, but I don't think that religion is simply a matter of rational belief statements either. I don't think going to church necessarily makes you a good person, but I do think going to church matters. I don't think reading the bible makes you necessarily knowledgeable, but I do think reading it matters. And, I don't think everyone needs to practice religion the way I do, but I think practicing religion matters, I do think Christianity matters.

In the end, I think religion is complex, like a lot of life. We can't just boil it down to one thing, or one experience we have had with it, no matter how much we wish we could. Religion, Christianity, is a rich but ambiguous thing.

I think the ambiguity of religious life is highlighted and made very real for us in our scripture passage this morning. This is a rather famous story, used time and again, especially during Stewardship drives. Christian churches everywhere look to inspire their members to give and participate and so they turn to the story of the poor widow; a woman willing to give all she had, even the very little she had. How admirable, how selfless, how moving she was! If only we could all give like her, then we would know the Kingdom of God! Religion is a wonderful thing because we can sacrifice all we have for it! Right?

When I first became familiar with this story I thought it was only about the widow's offering. I didn't connect it to what Jesus had to say just before it. And I think I missed an important meaning in this text—an important message. Jesus, teaching in the temple tells his listeners to “watch out” for those religious leaders who parade themselves around, showing off their status and importance, who give

lengthy prayers.

In today's words Jesus might have said watch out for those religious folks who display how pious and faithful they are, who rub it in everyone's face, and who gain status from it. And, he might say, “especially watch out for those preachers who give long, self-absorbed sermons.” Can I get an “Amen”?

[Seriously, because if not, I'm gonna preach for an hour about myself, so it's like a choose-your-own-adventure sermon at this point.]

Jesus might say all that to us today, and that message has its place, but Jesus does say something in the text that is very important—something that connects this talk of the religious leaders to our widow. Jesus says: watch out for those religious leaders who “devour widows houses.” You see Jesus was calling out religious leaders who were coercing vulnerable widows into giving away their estates and their money.

In our day, the elderly have been targeted for reverse-mortgage scams, in Jesus' day widows were vulnerable victims of the powerful who devoured them in greed. And religious leaders were powerful indeed. Instead of following the demands of the Mosaic Law commanding that the widow be cared for, instead of heeding the words of Jeremiah, the prophet, who on behalf of God said “If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless, or the widow... then I will let you live in this place, the land I gave your forefathers,” instead of taking care of the widow and showing them love; these religious leaders shook them down for money and even their homes.

On the heels of this we have our story, of a poor widow, who gives her very last to the temple. On this reading, Jesus is not showing his disciples what a wonderful thing this is, but rather decrying an injustice. We might shake our heads today if a poor man spends his welfare check on alcohol while his children go hungry and neglected. Jesus was shaking his head too, he was shaking his head at a religious system which takes the very last from people, leaving them with nothing. Jesus was telling his disciples “Look how terrible it is that the rich give only a portion of their wealth while the poor are coerced into giving all they have!” This is a prophetic Jesus. A Jesus criticizing his own religious tradition, his own culture, his own people—this is a Jesus exposing injustice and showing us how religion, including our own tradition, including Christianity, can be used to exploit, oppress, and

destroy. On this reading, the poor widow giving for a religious cause doesn't look too good. She's been fooled into harming herself.

So, is Jesus *praising* the widow who sacrifices her all for her religious faith? Or Is Jesus *criticizing* the institutional religious leaders and their system of exploitation? I wonder if Jesus might be doing both?

I wonder if Jesus is reminding us that religion can be a dangerous thing. That we have to be careful, that we have to watch out for those who use religion to hurt, to harm, to exploit, to demean. I wonder if Jesus is telling us to be aware of ourselves, because in baptism *we are all ministers* of God's grace to this world—in faith we are members of the *priesthood of all believers*. And as ministers, as religious leaders, we are susceptible to abuse our power. Religion can be a dangerous thing.

But I wonder if Jesus isn't also saying that such a system of exploitation, that abused religion does not have the last word. I wonder if Jesus is saying that yes, religion is ambiguous, that it can lead to harm and destruction, that it can be dangerous. But I wonder if Jesus is also saying Yes, religion can lead to healing and wholeness, hope and joy! I wonder if Jesus isn't also saying that even coerced sacrifices can be *redeemed*, that evil and violence and oppression can be *overcome*. How? With the promise of faith.

It is by God's grace we remember the widow, *not because she was exploited*, but because in faith her exploitation did not control her testimony—though she was a victim, she could not be reduced to a mere victim. No, even as a victim she was *still a child of God, one who teaches us by faith that exploitation is NOT true religion, it is NOT true Christianity*. The widow's faith speaks of a willingness to give everything to God—it speaks of a reliance on God to be her source of nourishment and protection, her source of meaning and truth—all of which exploitation cannot take away. Her oppressors are not the victors, because try as they might, they cannot rob her of God's grace and the promise of faith; the promise that she will be cared for by God even when people take advantage of her, that she will be loved even when her own religious leaders do not love her, that she will find her home even when her estate is stripped from her—Yes, in grace, Jesus can praise the widow—what a gift she has given to us!

We don't know what happened to the widow after giving her last coins. But that's because her story draws us into another. Her story foreshadows another one much like it, another story about the promise

of faith. This story was about the teacher and the observer, what happened to him; the one who shook his head at a system that would then shake him down, that would then nail him to a cross. We know that his faith crushed him under the weight of a wicked wheel of greed, power, and Sin. But we also know that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead so that he could point at the wickedness, greed, and lust for power of this world and say “No more!” We know that Jesus Christ promises us hope in the midst of ambiguity, gives us meaning in the midst of tragedy, shines his light in the midst of our darkness. Jesus Christ reminds us that though religions may be abused and people exploited, though religious people may even crucify God—this is not the final word—hope remains.

You see I'm not embarrassed to call myself a Christian pastor because I believe that Jesus matters. I am not embarrassed to call myself religious because I believe that religions, all religions, no matter how they are interpreted and abused, can still promise peace, justice, and abundant life for all. While I cringe to hear what warped ideas people have about religion—calling all Muslims terrorists or all Christians fundamentalists—while I cringe because I know that isn't what religious faith has to mean; when asked, *I can say with confidence **who I am**, and by your baptism so can you: We are Christian ministers.* We are God's Children, shown grace in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Cringe no more. Thanks be to God.

Amen.